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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Well, this week started off with sweltering temperatures, along with high levels of humidity. The AC was on full blast during those days because it was unbearable. But, nature has a way of leveling things off, and the past couple of days have been terrific! We missed one hurricane, but we're expecting to get hit by another one this weekend. Sure, it will only be a lot of steady rain and some wind, but it will be a close one. Hey, this is New England, so we've come to expect this stuff!

I realize that you've probably been inundated with news and commentary about this the past few days, but being a resident of Massachusetts, I feel it warrants a few words - the death of our senior senator, Ted Kennedy. While I was never a real fan of Ted Kennedy, I have to admit that he did a lot for the people of Massachusetts, as well as for the country. He was a champion of the poor and various "specialized" segments of the U.S. population. The man had a lot of clout, and used it. Some say that it was Kennedy's endorsement of our current president's run for office that helped put him in office. Possibly.

However, it was that Kennedy clout in other forms that led me to lean toward disliking the man. Don't get me wrong, a lot of what he did in his personal life should be commended. He helped raise JFK's children, and helped with RFK's after he was killed. He was the rock of the Kennedy clan. But, there was also that influence that only power and money can provide that influenced my negativity. First, there's the infamous event at Chappaquiddick. And how about the legal problems of others in his extended family: a rape trial and a murder case? You know that "Uncle Teddy" played a major role in both, even though one case was reopened many years after the fact and a conviction finally brought in! And how about those in the family with drug problems that were covered up until events came about that forced these issues to come to light? Yep, the "privileged", many times, manage to escape legal issues that you and I would never be able to overcome. Sure, you can say that he was only doing what any relative would do in his position, but it was his position of power that helped provide the influence to get results. Things like that just rubbed me the wrong way about our late senior senator.

And, you have to give Kennedy credit for using that same influence helping the less fortunate in this country. Granted, there was a lot of sadness heaped on that "Camelot" family over the years. And, it was sad when that family went through many tragedies over the years. But you know what, many families are beset with tragedy; they're just not known about because they don't have the same notoriety as the Kennedy family.

Massachusetts, and the country as a whole, will feel the loss of a great politician - both personally and politically. But, we'll also remember the less-than-positive aspects during his lifetime as well.

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Unless you live alone... in a cave... in Outer Mongolia, you know that Senator Ted Kennedy has passed away.

Now, many conservatives will tell you that Teddy was trouble... every bad thing that's happened to this country in the past 45 years can be laid directly at his feet. He's the bane of anyone who believes in fiscal responsibility and moral strength, that he was a 'spoiled rich kid' who was born with a silver spoon in his mouth and never had to worry about his own comfort.

The TRUTH, however, is that Kennedy had spent 45 years serving his country. Like what he stood for or not, he was one of the longest-serving senators in history, and he consistently stood for the rights of the individual over the rights of corporations and government agencies.

The list of bills and debates he's been a part of is truly astounding. Everything from the latter part of the civil rights 'revolution' to women's rights and equal opportunity to fair pay and workplace safety and helping the disabled, veterans rights and benefits, and finally to health care. The GOOD things in our society today are due in part to his influence and deal-brokering.

And while it is true that he'd never had to worry about money or where his next meal was coming from or how he was going to afford to send his kids to college, he was also looking out for those of us who DID have those concerns... even though he didn't have to.

I disagree with several pundits about one thing: Senator Kennedy's previous unwillingness to compromise on some things. If he had compromised, they say, we might have gotten some of the legislation he'd wanted sooner. For instance, he'd tried to get legislation on health care in the 70's and was at an impasse with President Nixon. Instead of compromising, he held firm to what he believed was needed. Nothing happened.

In the 90's, along with the Clintons, he again tried to get health care legislation through but reached an impasse with senate republicans. Again, he decided not to compromise. Again, nothing was done.

In the last several years, he'd come to think (according to those who claim to know) that if he had compromised, we'd have "at least something"

in the way of a coherent health care policy.

This is where I disagree. He did, for instance, compromise with the Bush (43) administration on education issues, and the result was "No Child Left Behind", a system and set of unfunded mandates that has lead not to teaching children how to learn and excel, but to be able to pass the all-important qualification test. Children are no longer being taught how to learn, they're being taught how to pass one particular test that may or may not say something about how much money a particular school district may be able to afford to pump into the effort. And those that do not have the necessary funds, be it from city, state or federal sources, often resort to 'fudging' the results; doing things like urging students with a low likelihood of being able to pass the test to stay home on testing day.

No, compromise is not the important part of legislation. It's knowing WHEN to compromise and understanding what the cost might be.

I have a dark, suspicious feeling that, when the current session of congress is through, any health care insurance reform bill that will be passed into law will be a half-measure at best, that the cost will be almost as staggering as it would have been if legislators like Senator Kennedy had 'stuck to their guns', and that it will benefit no on more than the insurance companies. Mark my words. I hope I'm wrong, but I'm not going to bet my health on it. [grin]

The closest I've ever gotten to meeting Senator Kennedy was a staffer who worked for him. A friend of mine was dating her, and brought her home from Washington for the holidays one time. I remember her saying that Kennedy was always busy, flying from one piece of legislation to another, always learning every nuance of every bill before him, and making calls or taking meetings to see if it could be made better or more useful. That he was constantly asking "how are things with you?" and "what's important to you about this?". Yes, it seemed to genuinely matter to him that other people... 'regular' people, not just other senators or industry bigshots... had some input.

At the time, I thought it was just the musings of a young lady happy to be so close to the halls of governmental power, but the more I heard about Kennedy over the years, the more I came to realize that he could not be simply summed up as a punchline to another "Chappaquiddick" joke, and that he really WAS one of the 'good guys'.

You're not going to believe this, but just as I was saving my final copy of this column, I got an email from that friend of mine. Here, in part, is what he said....

> "I am very saddened by Ted Kennedy's passing. Remember that girl I dated who worked for him? She was pretty low on the totem pole as far as staff people were concerned....she like myself was in her late 20s at the time.
>
> I put together a birthday party her...rented a hall and everything.... even invited my brother (who showed up) and got a local band, had beer, etc. Senator Kennedy showed up to this party! There were no VIPs -- just a bunch of kids in their 20s, and there were no photo opps, or anything anyone of Kennedy's stature would find useful. He led us in singing Happy Birthday to her, he stayed and hung around and talked to everybody. My brother said he had a nice conversation with him even though they'd never met before, he was not a voter in Kennedy's state,

had no favors he could grant or anything that the Senator might find useful or, very probably, even interesting.

Ever since that incident Ted Kennedy was held in very high esteem by me....and I am sad to see him go....."

Now the heck of it is that this particular friend of mine is... [gasp!] a republican! [grin]

Anyway, back to what I was saying...

Much of what we enjoy today is due, at least in part, to the labors of Ted Kennedy. I know that by now most people are sick to death of hearing about him on all the news broadcasts and 'special reports', but his years of service and dedication deserve some recognition, and no matter how long the 'reporting' goes on or how many mentions he gets over the next days and, possibly, weeks it won't be thank you enough to someone who never really asked for the recognition at all.

Well, that's it for this week. Let's hope there's some decent traffic in the NewsGroup next week. Until next time, keep your back against the wall, your eye on the horizon, your ear to the ground, your shoulder to the wheel and your feet upon the path... Now just try to get some work done in THAT position. [grin]

Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Microsoft Cutting Xbox 360 Price!
""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" BlizzCon 2009 Roundup!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Microsoft Cutting Price of High-End Xbox 360

Microsoft Corp. is slashing the price of the high-end Xbox 360 console by $100, matching Sony's $100 price cut for the PlayStation 3 last week.

Now, both the Xbox 360 Elite and the PS3 will cost $299. The price cuts in both cases are worldwide, though the exact amounts vary by region

depending on currencies.

Microsoft, which has had three versions of its Xbox 360 available at three different prices, also was to announce Thursday it is phasing out the mid-range, Pro, version of the console. It will be available for $249, down from $299, while supplies last.

The cheapest Xbox, the Arcade, which comes without a hard drive, will still cost $199.

The price cuts are effective Friday, said David Dennis, a spokesman for Microsoft.

Video game companies hope the price cuts will re-ignite sales in time for the holiday rush. For the bulk of this year, the industry has suffered from weak sales - hurt by the recession and lackluster game releases, which have kept consumers waiting to spend money on new titles.

The announcement from Microsoft leaves only Nintendo Co. without a price cut for the fall, at least for now. The Wii has cost $250 since its launch nearly three years ago.

Redmond, Wash.-based Microsoft has sold more than 31.4 million of the Xbox 360 machines globally, compared with 23.7 million PS3 machines sold by Sony Corp. and 52.6 million Wiis.

BlizzCon 2009 Roundup: Cataclysm, StarCraft II and Diablo III

BlizzCon, Blizzard Entertainment’s two-day celebration for enthusiasts of its popular computer games, converged this past weekend in Anaheim, Calif. Blizzard used the event to reveal its upcoming "Cataclysm" expansion pack for World of Warcraft, and also provided details of other games in development.

Cataclysm builds on a massively multiplayer game that’s been in continuous play since 2004, and has been added onto twice already with expansion packs. While previous expansion packs have emphasized improvements that mainly benefit high-level players, Blizzard is going back to basics with Cataclysm by offering new content to attract both new and existing players.

Accompanying some changes to Azeroth, the mythical land World of Warcraft uses as its setting, are completely revamped quests. Blizzard wanted to create quests that tied in to the new zones and were more enjoyable to the casual player. New "instances" have been added, for example triggered events that players initiate when they go on questions along with improved loot tables that should hand players more valuable items.

Cataclysm will also introduce improvements to the game’s graphics engine, permitting players with higher end computers to experience higher quality video. Blizzard development proudly showed off improved water effects. Both representatives we spoke to stated that the minimum hardware requirements to play the game will not be increased.

StarCraft II and Diablo III

While Cataclysm took center stage at BlizzCon 2009, it wasn't the only thing that Blizzard showed off. The company also offered details on two other products in its development pipeline, both of which will be available for the Mac: StarCraft II, its sequel to its hugely popular space-based real-time strategy game, and Diablo III, a new installment of Blizzard's "dungeon crawl"-style action role playing game.

StarCraft II eschews local area network (LAN) support altogether for Battle.net, Blizzard's own free server-based game matching system. This is a controversial change with longtime StarCraft fans, some of whom are disappointed that they won't be able to host their own local multiplayer games. But Blizzard says it's doing this to help cut down on piracy. Recently Blizzard indicated that it has pushed back StarCraft II's release to the first half of 2010 to rework Battle.net.

At BlizzCon Blizzard explained that Battle.net is being redesigned to keep players online without dropping the connection. It will offer additional challenges, more co-op gameplay modes and achievements that can be earned which require your being connected as you launch the game. Blizzard said that Battle.net is undergoing a complete hardware upgrade to accommodate the changes. Older titles will still run.

A new cooperate multiplayer party system within StarCraft II will allow you to team up against computer-controlled players. The system will also offer achievements for cooperation during gameplay.

Blizzard estimates that StarCraft II's single-player mode will offer between 20 and 30 hours of gameplay. Players can play some of the title's 26 missions differently via branching and each mission averages about an hour to complete.

Blizzard doesn't expect to launch a demo prior to StarCraft II's release, but some portion of the game's audience will be able to test a beta version of StarCraft II through the Battle.net service.

Diablo III is shaping up to be at least as long as Diablo II, and will feature randomized dungeons, quests and boss encounters. This will take a couple play-throughs to see and do everything.

Battle.net will feature increasingly difficult competition ladders for Diablo III. Blizzard representatives stated that Battle.net is being redesigned to facilitate playing with both friends and players around your level.

The recently-announced Monk class is being regarded as a "fragile tank" of sorts - "tank," in gamer's parlance, is a character that can absorb damage while others in the party attack enemies or try to achieve quest goals. The Monk character can readily engage a small to medium size group of enemies and hold his own. In cases where the Monk is surrounded by enemies, players can use a new combo system for attacks previously unseen in any Diablo title.

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Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

US DHS Revises Border Laptop Search Rules

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has released new rules for border agents searching travelers' laptops and other electronic devices, but the revised guidelines won't quiet complaints from the American Civil Liberties Union.

The new guidelines, unveiled Thursday, continue to allow U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to search electronic devices during border crossings without suspicion of wrongdoing. Both CBP and ICE are part of DHS.

The new rules were announced by DHS a day after the ACLU filed a lawsuit in an effort to get more information about border laptop searches. The ACLU and other groups have complained that the laptop search policy violates the U.S. Constitution's Fourth Amendment against unreasonable search and seizure.

The new guidelines are intended to provide more "transparency and accountability" for the laptop searches, said Matt Chandler, DHS spokesman.

The guidelines require CBP to complete a search of an electronic device within five days and ICE to complete a search within 30 days. In addition, agents must take additional steps to inform and educate travelers about the searches, and the DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties will conduct an assessment of the policy's impact on civil rights within 120 days, Chandler said.

The new rules provide a good balance between U.S. security and civil liberties and privacy, Chandler said.

"Keeping Americans safe in an increasingly digital world depends on our ability to lawfully screen materials entering the United States," DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano said in a statement. "The new directives announced today strike the balance between respecting the civil liberties and privacy of all travelers while ensuring DHS can take the lawful actions necessary to secure our borders."

But the new rules don't go far enough, said Catherine Crump, staff attorney with the ACLU First Amendment Working Group.

"DHS' latest policy announcement on border searches is a disappointment and should not be mistaken for one that restores the constitutional rights of travelers at the border," she said. "Members of the public deserve fundamental privacy rights when traveling and the safety of knowing that federal agents cannot rifle through their laptops without some reasonable suspicion of wrongdoing."

The ACLU does not oppose border searches, she added. "But it does oppose a policy that leaves government officials free to exercise their power arbitrarily," Crump said. "Such a policy not only invades our privacy but can lead to racial and religious profiling."

CBP has asserted that it can search all files, including financial

documents and Web browsing history, on travelers' laptops and electronic devices "absent individualized suspicion." The agency does need probable cause that a crime has been committed to seize a device.

In the past 10 months, CBP has dealt with more than 221 million travelers at U.S. ports of entry, according to DHS. CBP did about 1,000 laptop searches during that time, and only 46 were in-depth searches, the agency said.

FBI Investigating Laptops Sent to US Governors

There may be a new type of Trojan Horse attack to worry about.

The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation is trying to figure out who is sending laptop computers to state governors acros s the U.S., including West Virginia Governor Joe Mahchin and Wyoming Governor Dave Freudenthal. Some state officials are worried that they may contain malicious software.

According to sources familiar with the investigation, other states have been targeted too, with HP laptops mysteriously ordered for officials in 10 states. Four of the orders were delivered, while the remaining six were intercepted, according to a source who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the ongoing investigation.

The West Virginia laptops were delivered to the governor's office several weeks ago, prompting state officials to contact police, according to Kyle Schafer, the state's chief technology officer. "We were notified by the governor's office that they had received the laptops and they had not ordered them," he said. "We checked our records and we had not ordered them."

State officials in Vermont and Wyoming told him they've received similar unsolicited orders, Schafer said. Representatives from those states could not be reached for comment Thursday.

Schafer doesn't know what's on the laptops, but he handed them over to the authorities. "Our expectation is that this is not a gesture of good will," he said. "People don't just send you five laptops for no good reason."

The computers are now being held as evidence by state police, who are working with the FBI to figure out how the machines were sent to the governor's office, said Michael Baylous, a sergeant with the West Virginia State Police.

The West Virginia laptops were delivered Aug. 5, according to the Charleston Gazette, which first reported the story.

The laptops sent to the Wyoming governor's office arrived in two separate shipments on Aug. 3 and Aug. 6, according to Cara Eastwood, a spokeswoman for Governor Freudenthal.

"We received one package, opened it and realized that it was an error since no one in our office had ordered them," she said. "The next day we received another package. At this point we realized that they needed to be turned over to law enforcement."

Although there is no evidence that the computers contain malicious code, HP confirmed Thursday that there have been several such orders and that they have been linked to fraud. "HP is aware that fraudulent state government orders recently have been placed for small amounts of HP equipment," spokeswoman Pamela Bonney said in an e-mail message. "HP took prompt corrective action to address the fraudulent orders and is working with law enforcement personnel on a criminal investigation."

With users now more reluctant to install suspicious software or open attachments on their networks, scammers appear to be looking for new ways to get inside the firewall.

Criminals have tried to put malware on USB devices and then left them outside company offices, hoping someone would plug them into a computer and inadvertently install malicious software on the network. Many Windows systems are configured to automatically run software included on CDs and USB devices using a Windows feature called AutoRun.

Many organized criminals would be happy to spend the cost of five PCs in order to access government computers, said Steve Santorelli, director of investigations with security consultancy Team Cymru. "What is a netbook? $700? You send five of them; you're dropping three grand, and say you get into the Congressional e-mail system. How valuable would that be?"

Broadband Requests Far Exceed Amount Available

Businesses, nonprofits, libraries, hospitals and state and local governments have applied for more than $28 billion in funds for broadband projects from the Commerce Department's National Telecommunications and Information Administration and the Department of Agriculture's Rural Utilities Service.

The amount is seven times the amount available now through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. A preliminary analysis of applicant-reported data shows that NTIA and RUS received 2,200 requests for grants and loans totaling nearly $38 billion (including $10 billion in matching funds from applicants).

The Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which has $4 billion available through loans and grants, is focused on expanding broadband access to bridge the technological divide, create jobs, and build the Internet infrastructure, according to the agencies.

While the act provides a total of $7.2 billion to the NTIA and RUS for broadband, only $4 billion is available through the first grant. The agencies have just two weeks to decide which of the 2,200 applicants will receive the funds.

Ultimately, NTIA said it will use $4.7 billion to deploy broadband in underserved areas, expand public computer center capacity, and encourage adoption of broadband services. RUS will invest $2.5 billion in broadband deployment for rural communities.

The number of requests shows high interest in expanding broadband across the U.S., said Lawrence Strickling, assistant secretary for communications and information and administrator of NTIA. "We will move

quickly but carefully to fund the best projects to bring broadband and jobs to more Americans," he said.

"Rural communities clearly recognize that broadband can expand their economic opportunities and create jobs," said Jonathan Adelstein, RUS administrator. "The Obama administration's goal is to target funds to serve areas of greatest need. The big demand for loans as well as grants demonstrates that we can leverage private investment with USDA's $2.5 billion to deliver the greatest bang for the taxpayers' buck."

A whopping 830 applications were received by both the NTIA and RUS for nearly $12.8 billion in infrastructure funding.

More than 400 applications were filed with RUS's Broadband Initiatives Program requesting $5 billion in grants and loans for broadband infrastructure in rural areas.

Nearly $2.5 billion was requested in more than 320 applications to the NTIA to increase sustainable demand for broadband services. Included in those projects are broadband awareness and education, training, equipment and support.

The NTIA received more than 360 applications seeking $1.9 billion in grants for public computer projects in libraries, community colleges, and other institutions.

Both agencies say the numbers made public Thursday are preliminary and a further review is expected to find errors and duplications. Once completed, the agencies plan to post an online database of all applications received.

'Phishing' Drops; Are Scammers Switching Tactics?

Internet criminals might be rethinking a favorite scam for stealing people's personal information.

A report being released Wednesday by IBM Corp. shows a big drop in the volume of "phishing" e-mails, in which fraud artists send what looks like a legitimate message from a bank or some other company. If the recipients click on a link in a phishing e-mail, they land on a rogue Web site that captures their passwords, account numbers or any other information they might enter.

IBM's midyear security report found that phishing accounted for just 0.1 percent of all spam in the first six months of this year. In the same period in 2008, phishing made up 0.2 percent to 0.8 percent of all spam.

It's not clear what, if anything, the decline means. (It also doesn't appear to be a statistical illusion caused by an increase in other kinds of spam. IBM said overall spam volume hasn't expanded, like it did in years past.)

"That is a huge, precipitous decline in the amount of phishing," said Kris Lamb, director of the X-Force research team in IBM's Internet Security Systems division, which did the report. But "I wouldn't tell anybody that phishing has died as a threat."

Lamb believes phishing might have fallen off because computer users are getting smarter about identifying phony Web sites. Security software is also getting better at filtering out phishing sites before Web surfers ever seen them.

It could also be that criminals are moving on from phishing to another kind of attack, involving malicious software. IBM said it is seeing more instances of "Trojan horse" programs, which are used to spy on victims.

Dean Turner, director of Symantec Corp.’s global intelligence network, who was not involved in IBM’s research, said Symantec has also noticed less phishing, but warned that it could increase again later in the year. Phishing scams spike around the holidays, he said.

IBM found that criminals are changing the types of businesses they attack with phishing. Sixty-six percent of phishing targets were banks, down from 90 percent last year. Meanwhile, companies that handle online payments, like PayPal, are being mimicked in phishing messages more frequently.

To protect yourself against phishing, access sensitive sites on your own, rather than by following links in e-mails, which might lead to phishing sites.

Ownership of Unix Copyright Headed to Trial

A federal appeals court on Monday reversed a judge’s decision that granted the copyright of the Unix computer operating system to Novell Inc.

A three-judge panel of the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that a judge erred in August 2007 by granting the copyright to Novell. The panel ordered a trial to determine ownership.

Novell, a software and computer infrastructure company, has been locked in a yearslong legal battle with The SCO Group Inc. of Lindon, Utah, over ownership to the copyright.

SCO said the ruling paves the way for resumption of the court case.

SCO filed for bankruptcy protection in 2007, drained by unsuccessfully filing lawsuits claiming its software code was misappropriated by developers of the open-source Linux operating system.

"For us it’s a case of survival, of protecting what we own." SCO chief executive Darl McBride told The Associated Press.

Part of the Unix computer code, which was developed by AT&T in 1969, is used in the Linux operating system.

McBride said the development and distribution of Linux has caused the company’s revenues to drop from $250 million a year to $15 million, forcing the company to file for bankruptcy.

"There are 20 million versions of Linux running around the world," McBride said, referring to his estimate of company servers using Linux. "Linux at the end of the day is a knock off of our Unix."

Novell has operations in Provo, Utah, and Waltham, Mass. A Novell spokesman did not return a message seeking comment.

SCO has another lawsuit pending against IBM Corp., claiming Big Blue's Unix license for IBM's core AIX system was canceled in 2003 and IBM improperly gave away Unix source code for use in Linux.

McBride said the appellate panel's ruling reinstates SCO's claims against IBM, most which had been dismissed because of Novell's claim to the Unix copyright. A message left after business hours for IBM was not immediately returned.

Trial dates for SCO's lawsuits against Novell and IBM have not been set. Both cases are pending in U.S. District Court in Salt Lake City.

Microsoft Apologizes for Changing Race in Photo

Software giant Microsoft Corp. is apologizing for altering a photo on its Web site to change the race of one of the people shown in the picture.

A photo on the Seattle-based company's U.S. Web site shows two men, one Asian and one black, and a white woman seated at a conference room table. But on the Web site of Microsoft's Polish business unit, the black man's head has been replaced with that of a white man. The color of his hand remains unchanged.

The photo editing sparked criticism online. Some bloggers said Poland's ethnic homogeneity may have played a role in changing the photo.

"We are looking into the details of this situation," Microsoft spokesperson Lou Gellos said in a statement Tuesday. "We apologize and are in the process of pulling down the image."

UK Says Illegal Downloaders May Lose Web Access

People who repeatedly download copyrighted films and music could have their Internet connection cut off under proposed laws to tackle illegal file-sharing unveiled by the British government on Tuesday.

The proposal to ban repeat offenders from the Internet, which drew criticism from both civil rights groups and internet service providers, toughens up the measures being considered in Britain to crack down on online piracy.

Treasury Minister Stephen Timms said that previous plans, which would only have restricted users' broadband speed, did not go far enough.

That potential punishment remains under the new plans, but is accompanied by the possibility of blocking offenders' access to download sites as well as banning them from the Internet altogether.

If the measures are passed when they come to Parliament in November, Britain would join France in defying a European Parliament ruling in May that prohibited European Union governments from cutting off a user's

Internet connection without first going to a court of law. That ruling still needs a final stamp after negotiations with the European Council.

France, which passed its bill to cut off internet access for offenders in May, has already created what may be the first government agency to track and punish online pirates. The earliest a British ban could be put into place is 2011.

The British proposals put the onus on internet service providers, which host file-swapping sites, to catch and take action against offenders.

The music industry has been criticized in the past for targeting individual Internet users in its legal war against piracy instead of the internet service providers. The internet providers have been harder to pursue legally because they have been able claim they have no knowledge of any piracy occurring on their networks.

The new government proposals are an attempt to change that, requiring providers to issue written warnings to subscribers whose IP address - the unique number assigned to every computer that connects to the Internet - has been spotted on an illegal download site.

Copyright holders would then be able to use a court order to access details of any warnings issued by the ISPs and could then begin a civil lawsuit against any suspected offender.

Internet provider TalkTalk said it would "strongly resist" government attempts to oblige internet service providers to act as Internet police. TalkTalk said disconnecting alleged offenders "will be futile given that it is relatively easy for determined filesharers to mask their identity or their activity to avoid detection."

The Open Rights Group, which protects civil liberties in the area of digital technology, said any suspension would "restrict people's fundamental right to freedom of expression."

But the British Phonographic Industry, which represents the recorded music industry, said the move was "a step forward that should help the legal digital market to grow for consumers."

The International Federation of the Phonographic Industry's last annual report in January showed that legitimate music sales did not come close to offsetting the billions of dollars being lost to music piracy. An estimated 95 percent of music downloads are unauthorized.

Apple's Snow Leopard Goes On Sale Friday

Apple Inc.'s latest operating system software, Snow Leopard, will go on sale this Friday.

The Mac OS X version 10.6 software will debut at Apple's retail stores and authorized resellers nationwide. Apple's online store is now taking pre-orders.

Snow Leopard's release comes days before its promised September launch. It precedes by two months the launch of Microsoft Corp.'s next operating system, Windows 7.

Among Snow Leopard's improvements is built-in support for Microsoft's Exchange Server software, so Apple programs for e-mail, calendars and contacts could become more useful in corporate settings.

Apple said Snow Leopard is half the size of the previous version, freeing up to 7 gigabytes of storage space when installed. It requires a minimum of 1 gigabyte of RAM and runs on Macs using an Intel processor.

Users of Mac OS X Leopard, or version 10.5, can upgrade to the latest version for $29 for single users and $49 for a family pack of five users. For Apple owners using the Tiger operating system, or version 10.4, on an Intel-based Mac, switching to Snow Leopard costs $169 for single users and $229 for a family pack.

Consumers who buy a qualifying Mac from June 8 to Dec. 26 can purchase the Snow Leopard upgrade for $9.95. Users must request an upgrade within 90 days of purchase or Dec. 26, whichever comes first.

Jessica Biel Will Destroy Your Computer

How did you find this story? Did you find it after Googling the name Jessica Biel? If so, it may be too late. Jessica Biel is the Internet's most dangerous celebrity, and if she has her way, she will destroy your computer.

McAfee on Tuesday released its third annual "Riskiest Celebrities to Search on the Web" and Biel topped the list, beating out Brad Pitt, who came in first last year.

According to the study, those who search the terms "Jessica Biel," "Jessica Biel downloads," "Jessica Biel wallpaper," "Jessica Biel screen savers," "Jessica Biel photos" and "Jessica Biel videos" have a 20 percent chance of winding up on a site chalk full of malware like spam, viruses, spyware, adware, and phishing.

Coming in second to the 7th Heaven star was Beyonce. Jennifer Aniston, Tom Brady, and Jessica Simpson rounded out the top five, with Megan Fox, Angelina Jolie, and Miley Cyrus making the top ten.

Twilight stars Kristen Stewart and Robert Pattinson made the 20th and 30th spots, while Barack and Michelle Obama ranked 34th and 39th.

US Ranks 28th in Internet Connection Speed

The United States ranks 28th in the world in average Internet connection speed and is not making significant progress in building a faster network, according to a report released on Tuesday.

The report by the Communications Workers of America (CWA) said the average download speed in South Korea is 20.4 megabits per second (mbps) - four times faster than the US average of 5.1 mbps.

Japan trails South Korea with an average of 15.8 mbps followed by Sweden

at 12.8 mbps and the Netherlands at 11.0 mbps, the report said.

It said tests conducted by speedmatters.org found the average US download speed had improved by only nine-tenths of a megabit per second between 2008 and 2009 - from 4.2 mbps to 5.1 mbps.

"The US has not made significant improvement in the speeds at which residents connect to the Internet," the report said. "Our nation continues to fall far behind other countries."

"People in Japan can upload a high-definition video in 12 minutes, compared to a grueling 2.5 hours at the US average upload speed," the report said.

It said 18 percent of those who took a US speed test recorded download speeds that were slower than 768 kilobits per second, which does not even qualify as basic broadband, according to the Federal Communications Commission.

Sixty-four percent connected at up to 10 mbps, 19 percent connected at speeds greater than 10 mbps and two percent exceeded 25 mbps.

The United States was ranked 20th in broadband penetration in a survey of 58 countries released earlier this year by Boston-based Strategy Analytics.

South Korea, Singapore, the Netherlands, Denmark and Taiwan were the top five countries listed in terms of access to high-speed Internet.

US President Barack Obama has pledged to put broadband in every home and the FCC has embarked on an ambitious project to bring high-speed Internet access to every corner of the United States.

According to the CWA report, the fastest download speeds in the United States are in the northeastern parts of the country while the slowest are in states such as Alaska, Idaho, Montana and Wyoming.

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